Sep 8, 2019

7 Wise Leadership Lessons
Proverbs 31:1-9 Sermon

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> Alan can't for the life of him *see why God still has him in this organization.*[1] *It's a [cold] place — this big bank — and he's been thinking about leaving for a while. He's been brought in to a team that's being led by a much younger man who right now needs an older [leader] to steady the ship. Alan is that older [leader]. There are 130 in the team, their profitability is plummeting, and their employee engagement numbers are plummeting faster than their profitability. And apart from that, their technology belongs in a museum.*[2]

This is a true story in Mark Green's little book *The one about… 8 stories about God in our everyday* (www.licc.org.uk). I'm going to share this story with you as we look at our passage today because it is a beautiful example of wise leadership. Proverbs 31:1-9 is about a king named Lemuel. Some think Lemuel was an Arabian ruler from outside Israel.[3] As leader of the nation he wants his son, the future king, to lead wisely. Most of us aren't kings or queens but we do provide leadership in some part of our life, at home, at work, at school, at church, so there's something we can learn and apply here.

And if you're not a leader that's okay. Not everyone should be a leader. We need followers. But if you're a follower, you still need to know what good leadership looks like, and if the Lord calls you into leadership, you need to be ready. Thankfully, we have Lemuel and the book of Proverbs to help us lead well.

After next week we're looking more closely at Proverbs 10-29, which is much more topical and random than what we've been studying (Proverbs 1-9; 30-31). It's here we'll find what we normally think of as proverbs. These are short pithy statements meant to teach us wisdom. Today I want to give you a preview of that as we look at not only what Lemuel teaches about leadership but the book of Proverbs as a whole.

As I looked at what Proverbs has to say about kings, authority figures, and leadership I distilled what I found into **7 Wise Leadership Lessons**. These aren't just lessons on what it means to be a good leader but a Godly leader, someone who truly honors God in how they lead. Let's begin with the first lesson.

1) Godly leaders seek Godly wisdom.

Look at the first two verses of chapter 31. In them we find an implied call to seek wisdom.[4]

> **Proverbs 31:1-2**
> 1 The sayings of King Lemuel—an inspired utterance his mother taught him.

Inspired here doesn't mean Lemuel's mom was in a really creative mood and taught him something great, but that God somehow empowered her words. What does she tell him to do? Listen. She tells him to listen.

> 2 Listen, my son! Listen, son of my womb!
> Listen, my son, the answer to my prayers! (NIV)

To be a wise leader Lemuel needs to listen to God's wisdom, which his mother is teaching him. That's what we need to do too. We need to seek and listen to Godly wisdom. Alan listens in his story…

When [Alan] arrives his boss tells him, "Your work space isn't quite ready, so let me take you round to where you'll be sitting for now and introduce you to your No. 2."

"Great. I'd like to meet the other people there too," Alan replies.

"Why? You'll never need to talk to them" the young boss says.

"But they will be working for me."

"But… well, okay then," his boss responds with a hint of […] frustration in his voice, "I'll introduce you to your No. 2 and he can introduce you to the others."

What kind of culture is this? What kind of man is this? Alan wonders. And quickly discovers. He is immediately asked to restructure the whole team and ensure that he "restructures" a particular person, Keith, out, for reasons unnamed. Alan wonders, "What am I doing in a place like this? Where's God in this?"

"Where's God in this?" We can only answer that question if we seek and listen to wisdom. Wisdom is more than making the right decision. Wisdom is becoming the kind of person who makes the right decision. We become that kind of person through walking with God, seeking counsel, and living life. Seeking God helps us grow in Godly wisdom. Remember this call back in chapter 8?

Proverbs 8:15-17
15 By me (wisdom) kings reign
and rulers issue decrees that are just;
16 by me princes govern,
and nobles—all who rule on earth.
17 I love those who love me,
and those who seek me find me. (NIV)

This isn't just an abstract call to get wisdom. Wisdom is a metaphor for God. Come and be in relationship with God. Wisdom is not so much a what but a who. If we read the rest of Proverbs 8:22-31 in light of Colossians 1:15-17 we find Jesus is the fulfillment of wisdom. Jesus is wisdom in the flesh. As Christians we first seek Christ and God will add wisdom to us. So how are you seeking wisdom? How are you seeking a relationship with God and Christ Jesus? *1) Godly leaders seek Godly wisdom (through Christ).*

2) Godly leaders surrounds themselves with wise counsel.

In verse 3 Lemuel's mother warns him against inappropriate relationships. The first principle is to flee temptation but the second is to surround ourselves with those who are wise (Prov 17:7; 25:4-5; 29:12).

Proverbs 14:35
A king delights in a wise servant,
but a shameful servant arouses his fury. (NIV)

Proverbs 16:13
Kings take pleasure in honest lips;
they value the one who speaks what is right. (NIV)

We need people who will gently speak truth with love into our lives. We all need a coach, mentor, or friend with experience to help us navigate life. We need to hire wise employees and find wise coworkers. We can all

use wise counsel. In our story Alan listens to the wisdom in the office but he is also the older leader who shares wisdom with others.

> *About a month into his new role he offers everyone in his team half an hour of his time. They can, he tells them, talk about anything — career, family, hopes, ambition, God. Most of the workers, he discovers, aren't happy in their work — the leadership is poor, the politicking rife, the appreciation non-existent, genuine interest or care for people absent… Alan's "half hour" opens the floodgates for genuine communication: "People told me all kinds of things. One man, John, was an outstanding performer, on the cusp of being given more responsibility. He told me that he'd been divorced, that his daughter lived with his ex-wife, was suffering from a severe case of anorexia nervosa, and wanted to live with him… He was in tears in my office. Actually over 50% of the people told me really quite personal things. None of them had ever had a conversation like that with a manager."*

Alan becomes the source of wise counsel for others. We can be that for others. Is God calling you to be that for someone? And we need that in our own lives too. Who are you surrounding yourself with, wise counsel or foolish counsel? *Godly leaders surround themselves with wise counsel.*

3) Godly leaders exhibit self-control.

Lemuel tells us that if you can't lead yourself, you can't lead others.

> **Proverbs 31:4-5**
> 4 It is not for kings, Lemuel—
> it is not for kings to drink wine,
> not for rulers to crave beer,
> 5 lest they drink and forget what has been decreed,
> and deprive all the oppressed of their rights. (NIV)

The Bible doesn't prohibit drinking wine or beer. Paul tells Timothy to take a little wine (1 Tim 5:23) but he also writes to the Ephesians not to be drunk with wine but be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18). The principle is for leaders to have self-control and lead themselves first. Is there somewhere in your life that you need to ask God to give you more self-control? It's okay to bring these shortcomings to God in prayer. He doesn't judge us. He loves us. Wise counsel can also help—having someone come alongside you to share their wisdom and offer their encouragement and insights. *Godly leaders exhibit self-control.*

4) Godly leaders pursue justice.

If we don't deal with our lack of self-control it can lead to injustice. Lemuel's mother encourages him to *pursue justice* for the most at risk.[5]

> **Proverbs 31:8-9**
> 8 Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
> for the rights of all who are destitute.
> 9 Speak up and judge fairly;
> defend the rights of the poor and needy. (NIV)

Justice also means not using your leadership position to take advantage of others.

> **Proverbs 29:4**
> By justice a king gives a country stability,
> but those who are greedy for bribes tear it down. (NIV)

There is great reward for just leadership.

> **Proverbs 29:14**
> If a king judges the poor with fairness,
> his throne will be established forever. (NIV)

King Lemuel had the political and legal power to bring about justice in his nation (Prov 28:2). If you are in politics, great! Use your position to protect the poor and weak and don't let those with power and money control you. Most of us aren't in government but we can still find ways to bring about justice on our frontlines, the everyday places God has placed us. Alan did in his story.

> *And then he tells me about Keith, the man his boss wanted to "restructure" out. "I knew Keith had applied for my job and hadn't got it. He'd also applied for my boss' job and hadn't got that either. He told me that he's been divorced. He'd had a very tough year. He was in tears. I could see he was a man of substance, so I told him that we would look at why he hadn't got those two jobs and figure out how he could work towards the next promotion. Keith was flabbergasted."*
>
> *Alan also discovered that Keith was the only person in his sub-team who was client-facing. He had all the relationships. If Keith was "restructured" out, he'd go to another bank and take his clients with him, at a potential future loss of 185 million pounds (almost 230 million dollars). […]*
>
> *Well, when it came time for Alan to see his boss, Alan told him that unless they wanted to risk losing 185 million pounds to other banks it would be unwise to get rid of Keith. As for John (the outstanding worker with the daughter who was struggling), Alan asked him whether, given the difficult situation with his daughter, he would prefer, if it were possible, to be made redundant (to be let go). To Alan's surprise, John leapt at the prospect. Then Alan set about the hard and detailed task of seeing if there was a business case for such a move.*
>
> *Interestingly, the organizational structure that emerged turned out to be the optimal solution for the overall business. Good for John, good for the bank. As Alan commented, "That's usually the case, do right by the employees, and it will be good for all." When Alan informed John that it would all go through he prefaced it by outlining his own priorities in life: God, family, people, community, work. John was hugely grateful, and as it turned out, his daughter's situation improved dramatically.*

Alan pursued justice in his workplace.[6] How might you pursue justice on your frontline? Who might you need to speak up for or go out of your way to help? *Godly leaders pursue justice.*

5) Godly leaders recognize God's sovereign lordship.

At the end of the day we can create the best plans in the world but God is the one who is ultimately in control (Prov 16:9).

> **Proverbs 21:1**
> In the Lord's hand the king's heart is a stream of water
> that he channels toward all who please him. (NIV)

A sovereign is a king. If God is sovereign that means he is ruling over all things, leading all things, orchestrating all things to turn out how he wants. As leaders we can create our best plans but must still lay them before God and pray, "Thy will be done." At a couple different times in Alan's story that I didn't read he pauses and recognizes that maybe this is God's plan for him. He doesn't really want to be working in this part of the bank but if it's the Lord's will for him he's willing to stay.[7] Are you laying your plans in God's hands? Are you recognizing his sovereignty? *Godly leaders recognize God's sovereign lordship.*

6) Godly leaders remember God's grace given to them.

Several passages in Proverbs warn against the king's wrath and anger against those who disobey him.

> **Proverbs 19:12**
> A king's rage is like the roar of a lion,
> but his favor is like dew on the grass. (NIV)

> **Proverbs 20:2**
> A king's wrath strikes terror like the roar of a lion;
> those who anger him forfeit their lives. (NIV)

These verses don't model the type of leadership we're supposed to have (Prov 24:21-22). We're not supposed to lead by rage or anger. But they do warn us not to disobey our king, the Lord Almighty. We have a king who feels rage against sin and wickedness—brokenness in his good creation. He has every right to judge our sins too. But God shows us mercy. God doesn't give us the punishment we deserve because he took the punishment upon himself through his son Christ Jesus.

> **1 Peter 2:24**
> "He himself (Jesus) bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; "by his wounds you have been healed." (NIV)

To receive God's grace and forgiveness, we repent and believe in Jesus. If you haven't done that yet, I invite you to do it today. Let God lead your life. He's the very best of leaders. As leaders we need to operate out of the same mercy and grace God has given us, extending it to others even when they fall short. How can you extend God's grace to those who answer to you? To your children, your coworkers, employees, neighbors, family members, church family, whoever? When they deserve your anger, could you show them grace like Christ has shown you grace? Mark Green continues Alan's story:

> *A few months later, Alan tells me, "Last week my team did five deals. Five deals is outstanding by any measure. Outstanding." And the employee engagement numbers in the team of 45 that directly reports to him are soaring. The HR department can't understand it. Alan tells them, "I just talk to people." They still don't understand.*
>
> *It's not surprising really. There's an assumption in some companies that caring about your staff is a nice luxury if you can afford it, but not really essential. The only things that really count are professional competencies and drive. Increasingly, research is showing this to be false. Still, as ever, old attitudes die hard. Doing the best thing for a business, or indeed any organization, ought to include "doing the loving thing", the thing that humanizes, the thing that honors the other person as created in the image of God, the thing that seeks the best for them in the context they're in, tries to understand their talents, their hopes, their situation.*

Godly leaders remember God's grace given to them. And finally, number seven…

7) Godly leaders lead out of love.

You might not expect to find a call to love in Proverbs but it's there.

> **Proverbs 20:28**
> Love and faithfulness keep a king safe;
> through love his throne is made secure. (NIV)

This love is God's special "loyal love"—the Hebrew word "hesed." This is God's love for the king and for his people. God calls us to lead out of love, especially his love for us. It's more natural to lead out of gifting or talent or power or position, but just like Christ led us out of his love for us we are to do the same. Christ loved us so much he laid down his life for us (John 15:13). Everything we do must be out of a love for the ones we lead, our children, family, employees, friends, church members(1 Cor 13).

> *Yes, Alan has formidable international banking knowledge and outstanding problem-solving insight, but they only take you so far. It was Alan's abounding love, his soul-deep, authentic care for his people, his deep desire to know what they were good at and what would help them be their best at this point in their lives, that shaped the knowledge he sought to acquire and the range of insight he brought to the challenges they were facing.*
>
> *Maybe that's why God has Alan there: to demonstrate that you really can bank on love.*

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Jonathan Romig preached an earlier edition of this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church in Westford, MA on September 8, 2019 when he served there as pastor. You can download a PDF at archive.org or read it on Substack. Jonathan attended Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (GCTS) where he earned his Master of Divinity (M.Div) and Doctor of Ministry (D.Min).

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Discussion Questions

Questions for small groups, Bible studies, or personal devotionals:

1. What's an example of wise leadership you've witnessed in your life?
2. What does the wisdom of God look like?
3. How might you pray for leadership at your workplace?
4. How might you get wise counsel in your life?
5. What would it look like for you to provide wise counsel?
6. How can you share the wisdom God is giving you at your workplace?
7. How does Jesus embody wisdom?

Proverbs Sermon Series

Go through Proverbs in this sermon series: Everyday Wisdom

Resource Recommendations

Some of the links in this manuscript are affiliate links ("aff link"), which means we get a small percentage if you purchase the resource through the link. We recommend checking out your local library or thrift store.

Proverbs (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms) (aff link) by Tremper Longman III

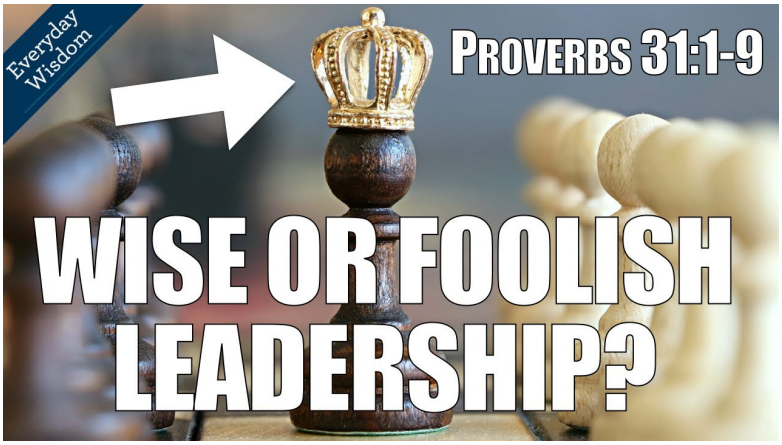
How To Read Proverbs (aff link) by Tremper Longman III

Read and share Alan's story here.

The One About: Eight stories about God in our everday by Mark Greene (aff link)

Free Sermon Notes Worksheet: Download

Sermon Video



Proverbs 31:1-9 Sermon on YouTube.

Endnotes

[1] Mark Greene, *The one about… 8 stories about God in our everyday*. LICC. London, UK. Pages 27-32. I've updated some of the spelling and words to their American transliteration (organization, chill/cold, head/leader, etc.).

[2] This story is posted with the permission of the LICC (www.licc.org.uk).

[3] See ESV Study Bible and NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible footnotes for Proverbs 31:1-9

[4] *Godly leaders lead out of Godly wisdom*.

[5] For other similarly themed verses see Proverbs 16:10, 12; 20:8, 26; 29:14, 26.

[6] Godly leaders also seek unity and create order. Proverbs 28:2 says, "When a country is rebellious, it has many rulers, but a ruler with discernment and knowledge maintains order." (NIV)

[7] See pages 29 and 32.